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ABSTRACT

Noting that critics charge that news reporting focuses on the superficial, personal characteristics of candidates and ignores the issues underlying elections, this Digest examines the relationship between the political process and political communication through the media. It addresses the power of advertising, cyberspace political communication, individual voter characteristics and the media, and public awareness and media coverage. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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Political Communication via the Media

by Nola Kortner Aiex and Stephen S. Gottlieb

In the 1992 presidential primaries, the public perceived the campaign as a largely negative one, with candidates trading criticisms and allegations. As the campaign unfolded, would-be voters gave low marks to the news media. In a national survey by the Center for the People and the Press, 65% of the respondents described the 1992 election coverage as "good" or "excellent," but a third of those surveyed called the reporting "fair" or "poor" (Kolbert, 1992). Frequently, critics charge that news reporting focuses on the superficial, personal characteristics of candidates and ignores the issues underlying elections.

Observers of the political process also target advertising, which they say distorts positions and trivializes important issues. At the same time, it is suggested that the predominance of polling by news outlets turns elections into popularity contests and causes candidates to follow rather than lead voter opinion on contemporary issues. This Digest looks at these and related questions about the relationship between the political process and political communication through the media.

The Power of Advertising

Advertising, by its nature, takes positions. Commercials suggest that the advertiser's product is better than a competitor's or is important to the viewer's well being. Such a claim may or may not be true, and the question is not always so easy for the reader, viewer, or listener to evaluate. In the opinion of one political writer, however, the "brainwashing" powers of national political advertising have long been exaggerated by some advertising men who, after all, make their money on commission from a percentage of the purchase of television time (Bennet, 2000). And he goes on to say that in the view of many media consultants, traditional television advertising is becoming even less effective in this era of channel surfing, mute buttons, and the Internet. "What still matters most in a national race, candidates and operatives will tell you, is what they rather patronizingly call 'earned' or

'free' media-the press" (Bennet, 2000). This nugget of political wisdom might be worth mulling over if it were not for the fact that George W. Bush won the Republican nominations in the recent "Super Tuesday" 2000 primary in New York, even though every single newspaper in New York City, from conservative to liberal, endorsed John McCain as the best candidate.

The ramifications of advertising in politics can sometimes be positive. Advertisements can help the public become aware of political candidates and issues and educate would-be voters about what is at stake in campaigns. In fact, commercials can be more instructive in that regard than debates—debates are seen to be more effective in improving candidate name recognition and knowledge of party affiliation (Just, 1990).

As is true of other types of human relationships, first impressions can be very important as voters form their opinions about political candidates. Research on election decisions suggests that candidates' use of the media can have a strong impact upon those who make up their minds about candidates during the campaign. Such voters are more likely to be swayed by political appeals than are people who have decided whom to choose before a campaign starts. While partisan voters use the media because they are interested in politics, undecided voters refer to media sources for information about parties, candidates, and issues (Blood, 1991).

Cyberspace Political Communication

In 1996 the Internet evolved into a key information source for voters interested in experiencing an unfiltered view of the political process through the lenses of the political parties, news organizations, educational foundations, media outlets, and a host of specialized interest groups (e.g. Common Cause, Sierra Club, National Right to Life). This access came in the form of World Wide Web sites, Usenet groups, and political agents and agencies through a rapidly expanding system of electronic-mail access points (Glenn, 1996).

Currently, in the 2000 election year, voters can contribute to their favorite candidate or candidates' campaigns on the Internet, and in some cases, they can even vote on the Internet—Alaska and Arizona both experimented with allowing their citizens to vote over the Internet in their 2000 primaries. It is probably only a matter of time before everyone will be able to vote over the Internet.

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Individual Voter Characteristics and the Media

Men and women react differently to the media analysis that generally follows political debates. A study conducted at the University of Florida during the 1988 vice-presidential debates showed that females took less extreme views of candidates after viewing post-debate analysis. By contrast, such analysis had little effect on the extremity of views expressed by politically involved males (Engstrom, 1989).

During the 1988 presidential campaign, the "gender gap," a perception that men and women perceived the leading candidates differently, was much discussed. George Bush's campaign planners were able to battle the gap through the way in which the candidate was portrayed in advertising. One advertising approach was to represent Bush as a law-and-order "Equalizer," who shared women's concerns about street crime. Another technique was to underscore Bush's belief in traditional family values. Additionally, the campaign used ads that stressed the candidate's ability to laugh at himself, as a way of showing his human side (Nelson, 1989). The last two presidential campaigns saw the candidates vying for the votes of the elusive "soccer moms"—those young suburban women, characterized as thoughtful, careful, and hard to convince. In the 2000 campaign, the candidates are vying for women's votes, looking for the issues that will resonate with women.

Like gender, race plays a role in how people view social issues and even how people respond to questions about such issues. Various studies have indicated that a member of one race will answer questions from an interviewer of another race in such a way as to avoid alienating the interviewer. It can be argued that even when an interviewer and interviewee are of the same race, survey results should be scrutinized carefully when the interviewer's questions concern a candidate of a different race. What remains to be explored is whether race should be treated as an uncontrolled variable in political surveys involving at least one white and one black candidate (Loge, 1989). The columnist Frank Rich (2000) has cautioned that "race is still the last subject in America likely to generate straight talk...."

Public Awareness and Media Coverage

Whatever its positive or negative effects, exposure to the news media does influence public awareness of elections (Walker, 1990). On the local level, for example, newspaper stories and advertisements can raise public awareness of municipal and school board elections, to the extent that voter turnout increases as a result (Luttberg, 1988).

The real question in a presidential election year, for example, 2000, is whether there will be too much media coverage of the national candidates, Al Gore and George W. Bush. After all, they were chosen in March 2000 for an election to be held in November 2000. The reporter Richard L. Berke quotes these perhaps apprehensive words from Haley Barbour, a senior Bush adviser: "I don't believe the voters want to be inundated with political campaigning every day for the next 35 weeks, however, with 24-hour news television and the Internet and the vastly improved news outlets, I feel the press won't let it rest. Every news organization is going to demand a Bush story and a Gore story every day" (Berke, 2000). The danger, according to Berke, is that the voters will tire of the candidates. If the candidates are constantly on television over a long period of time, they may wear out their

welcome with the voters by the time the election takes place, and the fear is that many citizens may not even bother to turn out to vote.

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